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FOR EUR DAS BRYZA AND EUR/CARC

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SUBJECT: ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN: MIXED MESAGES FROM THE
PRESIDENTIAL APPARAT ON U.S. ELECTION ASSISTANCE

REF: BAKU 447

Classified By: Amassador Anne E. Derse, for reasons 1.4 (c,d)

11. (C) Summary: On May 23, the President's senior legal advisor told the Embassy that the USAID-funded Election Monitoring Center (EMC) would not be allowed to conduct election monitoring following the recent court decision to de-register and disband the organization. In contrast, on May 15 influential Presidential Advisor Ali Hasanov told the Embassy that the recent public criticism of U.S. election assistance by the President's Chief of Staff did not reflect State policy. The President's chief political analyst told the Embassy that these concerns about assistance should be put in the past and we should focus on future cooperation, including on elections. The tough line on democracy assistance and media freedom appears to be hardening, in spite of several clear attempts to mend fences rhetorically. End Summary.

Legal Chief Takes a Hard Line

12. (C) On May 23, the Head of the President's Legal Department took a tough line on the question of whether the USAID-funded Election Monitoring Center would be allowed to conducting monitoring of the October presidential elections. "Before this was sent to the courts, maybe we could have made a phone call to change this, but now it is impossible," Aliyev remarked. He indicated that the Presidential Apparatus was unwilling to intervene earlier because of anger over statements made by senior Washington officials (reftel) and the alleged "double standards" of the West in judging democracy in the South Caucasus.

13. (C) The DCM pressed Aliyev on whether EMC would be allowed to conduct monitoring at all or whether it could reconstitute under another name and seek registration. Aliyev ruled out all of these possibilities. He went on to say that the reaction to the "double standard" extended to the OSCE/ODHIR monitoring mission as well. He said that as an OSCE member state, Azerbaijan would invite ODHIR to monitor the upcoming elections, but that ODHIR had lost the trust of Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis will not care as much about what ODHIR concludes. He blamed this loss of trust on the ODHIR report on the Armenian elections which he said downplayed any problems and had no mention of the killing of peaceful protestors. Aliyev also attributed the recent slowdown in the final approval for the lease for a new U.S. Embassy compound to anger over "double standards" and Washington public statements.

Other Officials Praise Cooperation on Elections

¶4. (C) By contrast, on May 15 the Chief of the President's Political and Public Affairs Office Ali Hasanov told the DCM that the recent public criticism of U.S. election assistance by the President's Chief of Staff did not reflect State policy. "Ramiz Mehdiyev said what he needed to say, but the remarks of individual members of government do not reflect the views of the State," Hasanov noted. He emphasized that Azerbaijan wants cooperation with the U.S. on the elections and that there must be both domestic and OSCE observation for the elections.

¶5. (C) Hasanov went on to amplify Mehdiyev's subsequent press remarks about relations with the United States remaining at a high level. Hasanov denied recent press reports speculating that Azerbaijan was shifting in its orientation towards Moscow. "Nothing has changed; we have the same policy," he added. He stressed the recent visits of U/S Jeffery and the U.S. delegation for the Bilateral Defense Consultations as evidence of our continuing high-level contacts. He said that his government wants an open and healthy dialogue with the U.S.

¶6. (C) (Comment: Ali Hasanov is the President's attack dog who is sent in to defend the government's most reprehensible policies on media freedom and human rights. He was totally out of character in this meeting -- straining to restrain himself on hot-button political issues and instead delivering a carefully-crafted positive message on cooperation. He also directly refuted the public statements by his director supervisor, Presidential Chief of Staff Mehdiyev. Hasanov is a blunt instrument, not a visionary thinker. We must

conclude that he was instructed to make these statements. End Comment.) The OSCE Ambassador in Baku, Jose Luis Herrero Ansola, reported that he had the same eerily-positive conversation with Hasanov later the same day. Council of Europe Co-Rapporteur Andres Herkel said he too was struck that Mehdiyev himself was uncharacteristically pleasant and low key in his meetings with him on May 19, but Herkel also noted that the GOAJ's methodical, negative steps against the media continued.

"These Issues are All in the Past"

¶7. (C) Presidential Political Analysis Chief Elnur Aslanov echoed these positive messages in a May 22 meeting with Pol/Econ Chief. Aslanov, who earlier admitted that he was the author of the GOAJ's list of alleged U.S. support for the opposition, dismissed previous disagreements over U.S. democracy assistance. "These issues are in the past; let's focus on future cooperation," Aslanov said. He acknowledged that U.S. election assistance would support Azerbaijan's goal of holding a free and fair presidential election, and encouraged the Ambassador to meet with Presidential Chief of Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev regarding the Election Monitoring Center (EMC). Describing the Ministry of Justice's case against EMC as a technical issue, Aslanov said "I am hopeful this issue can be resolved in a short time." Adding that he understood EMC had a long history of observing elections in Azerbaijan, Aslanov repeated that he is hopeful the issue can be resolved.

¶8. (C) Although Aslanov made it clear that the Presidential Apparatus was eager to put the flap over U.S. election assistance in the past, he also made it clear that statements by U.S. officials critical of Azerbaijan still rankled. "You are our strategic partner; you must remember that we have enemies." Senior Azerbaijani officials, he said, were upset by the comparison to Azerbaijan's "enemy." All of the countries in the South Caucasus) particularly as evidenced in recent elections in Georgia and Armenia - have problems in their democratic development. Azerbaijan feels that it has been unfairly singled out for criticism, Aslanov said.

Comment

19. (C) On the surface, the statement on EMC by the President's Chief Legal Advisor suggests a hardening of the government's position on the issue of U.S. election assistance. It also suggests that while Chief of Staff Mehdiyev and some of his senior lieutenants are trying to send rhetorical positive messages about the relationship, the negative actions in the areas of media freedom and electoral reform are marching ahead. The inconsistency of the message suggests also there is a debate within the President's office about how to move forward with the United States. We have pending requests for the Ambassador to meet the President, Foreign Minister and Presidential Chief of Staff. The Embassy believes that interventions by Washington may be able to further defuse the ill-will in Baku and help to put relations back on a constructive track.
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